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ABSTRACT

A 4-year longitudinal study of English 15-19 year-olds' learning experiences was used as the basis for the development of a theoretical model describing and analyzing young people and their learning in a modern world. Although much contemporary policy assumes that learning is regulated by teaching and standards monitoring, that learning progression can be predicted and controlled, and that learners' choices are, or should be, made on a largely informed rational basis, the study demonstrates that the life courses and learning of young people do not always fit these assumptions. Instability, pragmatic rationality, and unpredictability are commonplace, not exceptional, while learning is intricately bound up with a wide range of life experiences. Selected research findings show how experiences located outside educational institutions are linked to learning. An explanatory model can be made that builds description and analysis from the experiences of learners themselves. The model embraces the concept of learning career as a means of harnessing problems of structure, agency, and life course to the study of learning. (Contains 37 references.) (KC)

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LEARNING CAREER: CONCEPTUALISING TRANSFORMATIONS IN YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR LEARNING

by

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Purposes

The paper reports a four-year longitudinal study of 15-19 year-olds' experiences of learning (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997; 1999). The main aim of the study was to inform the development of a theoretical model to aid the description and analysis of young people and their learning in a modern world. Underpinning much contemporary policy are assumptions that learning is regulated by teaching (National Council on Teaching and America's Future, 1996) and standards monitoring (Wolf, 1998), that learning progression can be predicted and controlled, and that learners' choices are, or should be, made on a largely informed rational basis. The study reported here demonstrates that the life-courses and learning of young people do not always fit these assumptions or models. Instability, pragmatic rationality (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996) and unpredictability are commonplace, not exceptional, while learning is intricately bound up with a wide range of life experiences. The purposes of this paper are threefold: firstly, to present selected research findings showing how experiences located outside educational institutions are linked to learning; secondly, to present an explanatory model which builds description and analysis from the experiences of learners themselves; and, thirdly, to propose the concept of *learning career* as a means of harnessing problems of structure, agency and life-course to the study of learning. The paper concludes by noting some of the conceptual and theoretical opportunities released through the use of learning career in analyses of the profoundly complex phenomenon of learning.

Theoretical Framework

The research was exploratory, seeking ways of conceptualising young people's experiences of learning. However, insights gained in the early stages pointed directly to the shortcomings of theoretical approaches which treat learning as a purely cognitive phenomenon, extracting it from its social, cultural, economic, political, moral and other contexts for descriptive and analytical purposes. Those early insights prompted questions about how learning and context might be linked theoretically and served to orientate the shape, form and position of the thinking that followed.

There is an ample literature describing relationships between context, in a broad structural sense, and learning or learning opportunities. Concepts of equal opportunity, gender, poverty and ethnicity have frequently been used to describe and locate specific qualities of learners and learning (Howe, 1994; Valdes, 1998). However, our concern was also with the local contexts of learning and we have drawn from work on situated cognition, anthropology and constructivism in the positioning of our ideas. Learning activity is framed and shaped by culturally located ideas and belief systems (Brown *et al.*, 1989). It is a social process (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in which knowledge is constructed (Cobb, 1994; von Glasersfeld, 1996) and where contexts or structures, themselves, become modified through the social negotiation of meaning. Thus, structural properties are reproduced in practices across time and space, giving practice its meaning and social cohesion (Ranson, *et al.*, 1996). Likewise, habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) is created and recreated and the self continually reconstructed in a 'process of connecting personal and social change' (Giddens, 1991). In the same process, dispositions to learning undergo continual revision as part of the evolving identity of the person.

The theoretical framework advanced for this study has been constructed with these observations and claims in mind. It recognises that learning is not an isolated experience but that it is inextricably bound up with other life experiences. The framework incorporates structure and structural change, individual experience, identity and agency, and a life-course dimension in a single explanatory model of learning.

Research Methods

The Experience of the Learner was a four-year longitudinal study which commenced in 1995 and was funded by the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) of the UK. The data were obtained mainly from semi-structured interviews with an opportunity sample of 50 young people, initially aged 15/16, in their final year of compulsory schooling and on a further five or six occasions at six- or twelve-monthly intervals. A quarter lived in an urban conurbation in the North of England and three-quarters in small cities, towns and villages in the South West. Males and females were represented in equal number and the sample included five young people of South Asian ethnic origin. Our sample contained smaller proportions of young people from the most wealthy and least wealthy families than would be found in the population at large. Most interviewees attended comprehensive schools in England and, at the time of the first interviews, intended to proceed to some full-time post-compulsory education (see Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1996, 1998 for sampling details). Almost all did so, enrolling on a diverse range of courses. Many, but not all, completed their courses. By the time of the final interviews they were to be found studying in higher education, taking a year out of formal education, continuing or repeating post-compulsory courses, in full-time, part-time or casual work, unemployed or adjusting to parenthood.

Interviewees were asked to focus upon their experiences and evaluations of knowledge and learning, upon their wider educational, employment, social and other life experiences, and upon relationships with others. Attention was given to the ways in which they conceptualised and evaluated knowledge and learning opportunities and, also, to their perceptions and accounts of changes in their dispositions to knowledge and learning. In addition to the young people, 16 parents, school teachers and college tutors were also interviewed, for the purpose of illuminating the young people's own accounts. Supplementary data also included examination results and other data from schools, colleges and local authorities.

The analysis of interview transcriptions entailed searching for adequate ways of describing and conceptualising the data. Where relevant, data from other sources were utilised. As analysis progressed, the search for patterns among data and the processes of testing and developing explanatory models began. Individual stories were re-analysed on the basis of new data and, while some formative theorising was firmed up through this process, other theoretical speculations were revised in the light of new insights.

Amanda Ball

Our attention here is focused on processes of transformation in young people and their learning. To illuminate these processes, we concentrate on a single case, Amanda Ball. Hers is an unusually vivid story and it is included to assist our description and illumination of certain experiences of learning and of the processual complexities that we found were shared in some measure and in some form by many other young people who participated in our study.

Amanda enrolled on A-level[1] courses in English literature, theatre studies, philosophy and history. However, she withdrew from history within the first few weeks and from her other three A-levels before the end of the first year of her course. She had held hopes of becoming an archaeologist or an actress but our view was that these had been, 'based more on dreams and imaginings than on deeply held, thought-

[1] 'A-' or 'Advanced-level' General Certificate in Education (GCE) courses were introduced in 1951 for students intending to gain entrance to university. Throughout the 1990s, the proportion of 16-18 year-olds studying A-levels in England doubled to 30%, a majority of whom do proceed to higher education. The most common pattern is for A-level students to study three academic subjects over a two-year period. A-levels are the most prestigious of the English qualifications for 16-19 year-olds.

through possibilities' (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999, p 42) and that she had eventually come to realise their insubstantial basis.

> I decided that I didn't want to be an archaeologist any more so I'm not taking history ... That was probably just a phase and everybody goes through phases ... But it's only when that programme's on telly [*Timeteam*], I think - when it's in my face. But otherwise, I probably wouldn't give it [archaeology] a second thought.

The realisation of the frailty of some of her aspirations undoubtedly contributed to Amanda's reappraisal of her post-16 career. However, two other linked facets of her life were at least as important. First, she had been living on her own since the middle of her final year at school, having failed to agree with her parents on the conduct of family life, and had had to bear the full financial and psychological burdens of independent living. Although the management of her life had become a little easier with experience, as she had developed coping strategies for dealing with day-to-day intrusions into her affairs, the intense strain of her predicament did not abate. It was an ever-present and dominant feature of her life: the enduring context of everything she did or thought about doing. Second, there was Sash, a fellow theatre studies student with whom she formed a relationship whilst still on the A-level course. Sash moved into Amanda's flat and, some three years later, their partnership was stable and flourishing. However, Sash did not enjoy good health and it was not long before Amanda took on a responsibility for nursing him: 'it was the right thing to do at that time.'

But there is more to the story of Amanda's withdrawal from her A-level course. She valued the development of her own thoughts and ideas and had a critical disposition to knowledge and learning. She voiced a strong interest in disputable knowledge and a preference for the use of multiple knowledge sources and for the free exchange of ideas among learners and tutors. Her philosophy course appeared to match her interests well, as written and spoken argument were encouraged and expected. However, Amanda's experiences of English literature contrasted markedly with those of philosophy. 'You can't put your ideas and your thoughts into that at all', she claimed. Her response, or studentship (Bloomer, 1996), was one of strategic compliance with the expectations she perceived her English teacher to be projecting. Her frustrations were evident and form part of the story of her disengagement from formal education.

Having withdrawn from her A-level studies, Amanda quickly resolved to address one of the difficulties she faced: shortage of money. Her answer was to take an Advanced GNVQ[2] course in business in order to, 'get this qualification so I could get a job in an office anywhere.' She believed that she could enrol in a high fliers' group, effectively joining the second year of a two-year course. Her interests in knowledge and learning had shifted dramatically, it seemed, from the time she embarked upon her A-level studies. Her decisions were now pragmatic rather than whimsical and her evaluations of educational opportunities had become time-constrained and instrumental. Now her wants were for a different knowledge: a knowledge with earning potential.

We do not suggest that the changes taking place were leading to some new, stable, coherent and internally consistent set of dispositions to learning. Rather, Amanda's dispositions appeared to vary according to the situations in which she found herself. But at this point in her career, her emerging utilitarian interests were becoming increasingly evident.

We have suggested that Amanda revised some of her aspirations once she recognised their insubstantial basis. She had always held strong ambitions for an acting or singing career and we initially thought that they were fairly insubstantial: the wistful dreaming of an adolescent. However, her hopes were not

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[2] The Advanced General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) was introduced in 1992 as the vocational equivalent to A-level. In practice, the entry qualifications of students entering two-year Advanced GNVQ courses are lower than those of A-level students. GNVQs are currently taken by less than 10% of 16-18 year-olds and are focused on broadly defined areas of vocational study such as business, health and social care, and engineering. Students who obtain the required grades are eligible for entry to higher education.

entirely unrealistic for she had recorded music to a publishable standard and had been acclaimed for her acting performances in several local productions. Moreover, unlike her aspirations to be an archaeologist, her ambitions for a career on the stage did not disappear. Along with her relationship with Sash, they assumed a central place in her thinking and being and became, arguably, a principal driving force in her transforming aspirations, as we shall see.

Unfortunately, Amanda's GNVQ plans did not work out. The high fliers turned out to be a one-year group studying for a lower status NVQ[3] award:

> I was put in with people a year younger than me and a couple of groups lower than I should have been in … So I left that … and I went to the Careers Centre and said that I wanted to get a job where I could get training as well.

In the event, she had little trouble finding the work she wanted in a solicitors' office with training for an NVQ. At this point, she was at her most optimistic and began planning for the future. Sash was to complete his A-levels and move on to Drama School while she would work to support them both before moving off with Sash. In time, when Sash could take his turn at bread-winning, Amanda would embark upon her own artistic career: 'And in the end, I'd like to go into singing because that's the only thing I've been able to stand out from everybody else.' Without her musical aspirations, it is possible that Amanda would have planned a different future. Dreamlike or not, those aspirations were functionally valuable and real in their consequences.

After three months, Amanda left her employment to join another firm of solicitors with supposedly brighter prospects. Before long, she had begun to describe her new situation as somewhere she could settle. 'I could do this. I could stay in this kind of solicitors, you know, business or what ever.' She had come to attach some intrinsic value to a situation she had initially engaged with for purely utilitarian purposes. However, she lost the job for reasons that appeared to have been not of her own making and, bitter and angry, she moved on to further employment.

Amanda's learning career shifted markedly from one set of purposes to another while the actual course taken was attributable in part to events outside her control. She sought to impose herself on her world but this became progressively more difficult as her life unfolded. Some features of her story, such as her dropping-out of the A-level course, attempting to enrol on the GNVQ or seeking employment, are highly visible landmarks in her career of twists and turns. However, these should not be allowed to obscure other, arguably more profound, changes that were taking place simultaneously. She was becoming hardened as she put it, and utilitarian, while her dispositions to knowledge and learning were transforming within the same process.

Theorising Learning and Change

The challenge facing us here is how to theorise the issues we have begun to describe. For Amanda, learning was not simply a matter of 'tuning in' to her teachers' expectations of what and how she should learn or of assimilating the experiences to which she was systematically exposed. She made her own sense of, and acted upon, those planned experiences. She had entered her A-level courses with dispositions to knowledge and learning, formed prior to her first encounters with her tutors and fellow students. Subsequent changes in those dispositions can be linked not only to events which occurred within her formal education but also to her life outside it. Moreover, it was apparent that, in so far as learning has anything to do with changes in attitudes, values and skills, Amanda learned a great deal through informal life experiences, not least those connected with her independent living and personal relationship.

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[3] The National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) was introduced in the 1980s and is focused upon occupationally-specific knowledge and skills. NVQs are awards rather than courses and are offered at a number of different levels. Most further education institutions provide courses of varying lengths leading to NVQ awards.

For her and others, learning is ubiquitous in ongoing activity. It is a participatory act – a profoundly social and cultural phenomenon, not simply a cognitive process. In our use of the term 'learning', then, we refer to social practices in which knowledge, skill and meaning are created and transformed.

This preliminary characterisation of learning as a social practice parallels notions of situated learning, but also ties in closely with the claims of symbolic interactionism. The premises of symbolic interactionism are that individuals act according to the meanings which they attribute to their experiences; that meanings are generated through processes of social interaction; and that they are continually reinterpreted and modified as the result of further social interaction. It is through processes of social interaction that actions are constructed 'by actors out of what they take into account' (Blumer, 1969, p 74) and through which learning takes place.

Linking meaning, participation and action is disposition. By disposition, we mean orientation or inclination to practice, in this case the practice of learning. The symbolic interactionist view is that dispositions to learning are founded on the meanings that learners attribute to knowledge and learning, and on their definitions of what knowledge is and of what learning entails. They also rest upon subjectively maintained notions of the intrinsic or extrinsic worthwhileness of given learning opportunities. These meanings and notions are formed and reformed as part of the meaning-making which takes place in social interaction while giving shape and direction to that same process.

Whereas symbolic interactionists see dispositions as grounded in subjective experience, Bourdieu emphasises their relationship with position (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). He talks of a person's habitus: a portfolio of dispositions to all aspects of life, largely tacitly held, which strongly influence actions in any situation. The habitus is, in turn, influenced by who the person is and where in society they are positioned, as well as by their interactions with others, in what he terms a 'field'. Like the symbolic interactionists, Bourdieu sees people as actors who influence the nature of the field, as well as being influenced by it. The nature of the field determines the sorts of capital (social, cultural and economic) which are valuable within it and, in turn, the capital possessed by an individual influences their ability to succeed in the field, and to affect its nature. This highlights the breadth of context and experience that interact with and influence dispositions to learning. For Bourdieu, it is a nonsense to separate dispositions from habitus and field. Bourdieu's emphasis on position has prompted some writers to accuse him of structural determinism (Jenkins, 1992) whilst the symbolic interactionists have been accused of failing to account for social structure (Skidmore, 1975). In making sense of our data, and in understanding stories like Amanda's, we struggled to retain both perspectives.

The relationship between learning and context is also central to situated learning theory. From this perspective, context is not simply where action and learning are located; it is constructed in the course of social interaction as part of the meaning-making processes, or learning, which inform action. Meanings are integral to context. Thus, action and learning exist in a mutually constitutive relationship with context or situation. This resonates with both the symbolic interactionism of Mead and Blumer and with Bourdieu's account of relations within a field. Moreover, contexts do not have an independent existence of one another such as is implied by dualistic distinctions commonly made between home, school, peer group, college or work contexts:

> ... local practices must inevitably take part in constituting each other, through their structural interconnections, their intertwined activities, their common participants and more (Lave, 1993, p 22).

These interconnections have a temporal dimension. Thus, as Amanda's story illustrates, 'one way to think of learning is as the historical production, transformation, and change of persons.' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p51). Or, as Bourdieu put it,

> the *habitus* is a product of conditionings which tends to reproduce the objective logic of those conditionings while transforming it. It's a kind of transforming machine that leads

> us to 'reproduce' the social conditions of our own production, but in a relatively unpredictable way, in such a way that one cannot move simply or mechanically from knowledge of the conditions of production to knowledge of the products (1993, p 87).

This potentially problematic mixing of symbolic interactionism, situated learning and Bourdieu's notion of habitus, begins to reveal something of the complexity of our data. Many of our young people changed in their learning dispositions or activities over the four-year period of the project in highly visible ways; in some cases, like Amanda's, changes were of major proportion. Such changes were often unpredictable although they could usually be understood with hindsight. Yet, as in Amanda's case, not everything about a person's disposition altered, and very few, if any, broke free of the patterns of educational and employment progression, predicted for the broad social categories, particularly gender and class, to which they belonged. For this reason, we drew the temporal dimension to the heart of our analysis, in a manner which recognised both the situatedness of learning and its relationships with other facets of life.

Learning Careers

To do this, we have built our theorising around the concept of *learning career*, where career refers to 'any social strand of any person's course through life' (Goffman, 1968, p 119). The strand in this case is learning. However, we note the unsuitability for our purposes of that common notion of 'career' which suggests a '"fixed and inevitable process" ... (and) depicts career as having an ideal-typical path of upward progression' (Armstrong, 1987, p 9). Such a notion carries assumptions that direction is determined at an early stage, that subsequent decisions are made rationally, and that metaphors of linearity, stability and trajectory are adequate for description. For the vast majority of young people in our study, instability, unpredictability and idiosyncracy were better descriptors. Moreover, our cases highlighted the importance of career as both a partly subjective experience, and a transformatory process intricately bound up with other life experiences, as 'an evolving, continuously renewed set of relations' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p 50). This changing experience distinguishes what a career is as well as how career, in this case learning career, is tightly intertwined with other aspects of people's lives.

A learning career is, therefore, simultaneously subjective and objective: 'the moving perspective in which a person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes, actions and the things which happens to him' (Hughes, 1937, pp 409-410). 'It is not experienced; it is the experience' (Tripp, 1999, personal communication) and serves to constrain and enable future experiences. It is a career of events, activities and meanings, and the making and re-making of meanings through those activities and events, and it is a career of relationships and the constant making and re-making of relationships, including relationships between position and disposition.

Learning career refers to the development of dispositions to learning over time (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997). Just as it is possible to speak of political, spiritual and even motoring careers, so it is possible to think in terms of a learning career in which other relevant human experiences, and ways of experiencing them, are described in terms of their relationships with the pivotal concept, learning. Thus, learning and dispositions to learning are seen in terms of their relationships with other material and cultural phenomena, including the meanings which learners attribute to those phenomena. Amanda Ball's salient experiences during the first twelve months that we knew her, for instance, included her own economic independence, her English literature course and her relationship with Sash, all of which had a crucial bearing upon the development of her dispositions to knowledge and learning. But it was not only Amanda's dispositions to knowledge and learning which underwent change. So did her personal identity, evidenced by changes in her values, her appraisals of her situation and, noticeably, her aspirations. At the same time, there was a balancing continuity in Amanda's dispositions, and her reactions to the difficult situations in which she found herself were, in many ways, typical of a working class young woman.

Elements of continuity are also recognised in symbolic interactionism: 'The designations and interpretations through which people form and maintain their organized relations are always in degree a

carry-over from their past' (Blumer, 1969, p 60). Learning careers are marked by both continuity and change although the balance between them may differ markedly from case to case, from time to time, and from situation to situation. For this reason, the notion of transformation appears better-suited to describing the development of learning careers than that of change on the one hand, or trajectory on the other.

Transformations in learning careers take many forms. They are not predetermined although they are orientated by the habitus, and by the contexts in which a person is positioned. That is, at any moment in time, a person has 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996), which enable and constrain their actions, and within which their learning career develops. These horizons are simultaneously subjective and objective, being composed of the material conditions in which the person finds him/herself; in their own perceptions of those conditions and of themselves, in turn located in their habitus; and in the meanings they make in that situation at that time. Furthermore, as Amanda's story demonstrates, horizons can be altered by happenstance. Unfortunately, we are not able to give a detailed account of the formation of Amanda's dispositions to learning prior to the commencement of our research, although we did gain insight into some of the meanings which she had constructed on the basis of earlier experiences. Firstly, her commitment to continuing in full-time education was linked to her strong desire to escape the fate of her working-class parents whom she saw as being 'in a rut' through not possessing the qualifications to enhance their employment opportunities. Secondly, Amanda gave a number of indications that liberal values had come to assume increasing importance to her during her teenage years and that these might have accounted, in some way, for her choice of A-level courses. Thirdly, she recalled from her primary school years losing any enthusiasm she had for mathematics: 'I can remember … just not being able to do it and getting told off and stuff like that. But since then, I've closed my mind to it.' Events such as this might have played a significant part in the development of Amanda's dispositions to knowledge and learning although we are unable to tell whether this was so on the basis of the interview data to hand. Fourthly, although she did attribute some utilitarian value to the study of drama, our earlier interviews reveal that she also regarded it as an opportunity to escape the pressures of everyday life.

> Oh, it's weird. It's like stepping into a cold shower. You can be feeling all fed-up and bored and everything, and then you go and do a piece of drama, and it's like some girl who's got a drug problem or some Mum with misbehaving kids, and all of a sudden you've got other things to think about. And it's, like, really real. It's like you've got these kids that are not doing what you want them to do ... and when I was doing 'Golden Grove': I was this girl called Sharon, and for all of the months that I was doing that, half of my brain was thinking about all of Sharon's problems while the other half was thinking about my life and getting on with it. It's just like ... it's a bit refreshing; it's just a change. It's not often that you get the chance to change your life totally but acting gives you that opportunity.

Amanda's identity and habitus were significant forces in the transformation of her learning career and were themselves partly transformed in that process. Her commitment to performing arts was a cornerstone of her identity and remained so throughout the time we knew her. However, she had also become hardened and streetwise from the experience of independent living and had assumed the responsibilities of partner and breadwinner over that same period. This had proved the most powerful learning experience of all for Amanda. Her identity had become significantly transformed in this process despite the fact that she remained an aspirant performer. Her identity as a singer and performer became modified as she built up her role as carer and partner in her relationship with Sash. As such, she was not untypical of the young women of Gaskell's (1992) study who were more likely than young men to place family before career. For this complex combination of reasons, Amanda's habitus had become partly transformed and her position, at least as defined in class and gender terms, partly confirmed. Her love of drama held a different significance at 17 to the one it had held when she was 16.

The college context of Amanda's learning career had not changed in any substantial sense, from the time she embarked upon her A-level studies to the time she withdrew from them. However, there is little doubt

that her perceptions of that context had changed considerably as the hardships of independent living had begun to weigh more heavily and distract further, as her educational achievements had become progressively less fulfilling and as her frustrations with learning had begun to mount. Under these conditions, coupled with the opportunities and costs associated with her new relationship, the prospect of business-related employment took on a different meaning and Amanda's dispositions to learning began to transform.

> The situation described here is ... one of ever-changing disposition, habitus and personal identity – each finding a new equilibrium as newly perceived structural opportunities disturb the old (Bloomer, 1997, p 153).

The stories related by most of the young people who participated in our study told of transformations in their learning careers. On the one hand, we were drawn to describe them as resulting from changes in the contexts of learning careers, as though movement in external structures was the principal force in the generation of meaning. On the other hand, context was the product of meaning-making processes and transforming perceptions. In some instances, we were fairly certain that there had been identifiable changes in context which were linked to changes in dispositions to learning. The onset of Sash's illness, for instance, had contributed to concerns with earning money becoming foregrounded in Amanda's perception and appraisal of her circumstances. In other instances, however, specific triggers or stimuli were less easy to discern, despite abundant evidence of shifting perceptions and evaluations, as when Amanda realised that her aspirations to become an archaeologist had little substance. It was not that contextual or situational elements were not relevant in such cases but that their relations with transforming perceptions and evaluations were of such complexity as to defy simple description. These complex inter-relationships were reflexively fluid, making simple causality impossible to identify. Indeed, we would argue that it is often dangerously misleading to attempt it.

Learning Careers: Further Development

Our use of the concept of learning career, referenced to symbolic interactionism, situated learning theory, Bourdieu's sociology and the case of Amanda Ball, has helped us to illuminate the contexts and processes of transformation in ways not easily achievable from other theoretical standpoints. However, while we have focused closely upon *how* transformations occur, the question that we have not addressed directly is *why* they occur.

One thing that has been plain throughout is that transformations in learning careers are linked with other transformations in persons and identities. Amanda's growing awareness of the harsh necessities of living and her personal relationship with Sash were linked to changes in identity and were crucial to understanding changes in her dispositions to knowledge and learning. The dispositions of other young people in our study shifted in different ways. Early in her post-16 studies, for instance, Tamsin Rooke (Bloomer and Hodkinson, in press) displayed a strong preference for teacher-dependent learning. However, for reasons linked to her growing social- and self-awareness at that time, her preferences shifted to assignment-based learning and to learning from her own practical experiences – and from that point on, she thrived in her studies. It was only in a small minority of cases, such as Chris Figgitt (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999), that no significant transformations were discernible. In cases where learning careers had been noticeably transformed, new dispositions to learning were sometimes found to be linked to the development of some new political, economic, social, moral, sexual or other awareness. In Amanda's case, it was her newfound economic awareness and personal relationship that were paramount. This illustrates the situatedness of learning. But we should also note that the learning we are describing is participatory: it is grounded in processes of meaning-making through positioned social interaction.

The question, 'Why do learning career transformations occur?' has been partly answered here: the exposure of young people to more diverse forms of social interaction, and to new events and changing circumstances, such as occur during the adolescent years we have witnessed, expands opportunities for

new constructions of meaning, and may make some established meanings hard to retain. However, opportunities for social interaction do not unfold in a systematic manner. Much turns on happenstance. Had Sash not joined the same theatre studies course as Amanda, it is possible their relationship would not have become established. Had he not been ill, it is possible Amanda would not have felt herself under pressure to withdraw from college. Had she joined a different A-level English group, she might not have become so frustrated with her teacher. As we have consistently claimed, there is much that is unpredictable about learning careers.

On the other hand, notwithstanding these observations, we did discern broad patterns in learning careers (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999). One was that utilitarian interests appeared to assume progressively greater importance for young people between the ages of 15 and 19. This is not a surprising revelation given that many young people of this age become attracted to increasingly expensive social activities and more aware of the insecurities of the employment market. There seemed to be two linked influences on the move towards utilitarianism. For some, like Amanda, it came from a growing perception of financial hardship or economic insecurity. For others, it came as the point of actual entry into the labour market approached. Those in our sample most able to sustain a strong interest in learning for its own sake were often from middle-class backgrounds, studying A-levels, and aiming for university: thus putting off labour market entry for several years. However, there are several exceptions to this pattern, and our data force us to be tentative here. What differed from person to person, was the ways in which their growing utilitarianism became manifest. For some, it confirmed enduring commitments to particular views of knowledge and learning. For Amanda, it meant switching from A-levels to GNVQ to NVQ-based training schemes and breaking, at least temporarily, with the artistic career she had always hoped for.

As indicated, economic, social and, in particular, cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) are significant in the formation and development of learning careers. Even given the constraints of her working-class background, Amanda's career might have taken a different course had she had greater economic security. But she also lacked cultural capital. Her mother had had very little experience of further education and her father none at all. This was true of many, often working-class, young people. They were more likely to opt for vocational than A-level courses, and they comprised a large proportion of those who did not complete or struggled to complete their courses satisfactorily, and a smaller proportion of those going on to higher education. This finding dovetails with other recent research (Banks *et al.*, 1992; Bates and Riseborough, 1993; Brown and Scase, 1994; Kerckhoff, 1993; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997) supporting the claim that economic, social and cultural differences remain powerful influences upon life chances. However, the impact of such factors is not crudely deterministic, and can be unpredictable in the detail of individual careers.

One final observation is that transformations in learning careers were often linked with critical turning points in which learners had sometimes had to confront harsh changed circumstances. Amanda's is a clear case in point. But not all critical turning points were linked to the abandonment of formal education. Kate Stapley (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997) had rejected formal education by the age of 15: 'you couldn't have dragged me into a learning building.' However, when faced with the need to work and to collaborate with others, she revised her views of knowledge and learning and eventually re-engaged with formal education. In such cases, the critical turning points prompted learners to appraise themselves and their life-worlds in ways they had not done before.

Benefits of the Learning Career Approach

The concept of learning career widens opportunities for theorising learning and transformation in the lives of young people. Firstly, it provides for an attempt at the integration of structure and agency and for analysing the dynamics of structure-agency relationships. Secondly, the central positioning of subjective experience in the learning career enables the integration of a wide range of experiences. There is a methodological irony here, for it is in apparently focussing on individual perceptions, that the impact of wider social, cultural and economic factors on learning can be brought into view. This

makes for the contextualisation of experience and aids illumination of the situatedness and relational nature of learning. It also enables categories (such as 'work-based learning' and 'formal institutional learning') to be at least partly transcended. Thirdly, the concept of learning career offers opportunities for theorising a longitudinal dimension to learning without simplistic recourse into teleological personal growth, unchanging psychological traits, determining social structures or, alternatively, complete unpredictability in a post-modern flux. It offers a crucial life-course dimension, often missing from accounts of learning. Fourthly, it allows for exploration of the uniqueness of individual careers, without loosing sight of broader social, cultural and economic conditions. It enables learners to be understood in terms of their intrinsic qualities, not their type. Finally, it explicitly recognises that there is much about modern life that is at least partly unpredictable.

Learning career can help achieve these things through the moulding of description and analysis to the experiences of learners (as opposed to fitting those experiences into categories originating in some other time or place). The benefits of doing so are revealed through case studies such as that of Amanda Ball.

Whatever form further theoretical development might take, transformations in learning careers have important implications for our understanding of learning. They demonstrate that a longitudinal perspective on learning is important. Furthermore, they show how inadequate it is to model learning, even implicitly, around notions of fixed personal styles, traits or schemata. Our study suggests that learning careers are best seen as complex inter-relationships between the constant and the flux, the balance between the two varying from person to person, from time to time, and from situation to situation.

Our work has much in common with, and draws heavily upon, theorising about situated learning and cognitive apprenticeship. We, too, emphasise complexity in our explanations of learning. We hope that this paper adds two further dimensions to that work: firstly, a more detailed understanding of the transformative nature of many learning careers and, secondly, a reminder that context means far more than simply the setting where learning activity is located. If we are even partly correct in our analysis, there is more to be done. Much more theoretical development is required, and there is a need to know whether and how the experiences of learners from other age groups or situations can be usefully understood through the concept of learning career. Moreover, it is apparent to us that class, race, gender and ethnicity are linked to learning career patterns, as Amanda's story has partly demonstrated, and we are currently exploring the detailed nature of some of those linkages. In an age that rhetorically espouses lifelong learning, the longitudinal development of individual learning careers must be a central academic and policy concern.

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